

## ORDER OF PROCEDURE

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I may be permitted to continue past the hour of 10:30 in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

## THE FARM CRISIS

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I wanted an opportunity to talk about the farm crisis that is now facing our country, and certainly facing my State. I represent North Dakota, which is one of the most agricultural States in the Nation. There is no question that our farmers are facing a crisis of really unprecedented proportion.

As I go around my State, every place that I have a farm meeting, farmers have a sense of hopelessness. One of the reasons is that is happening to farm income. I have just come from a hearing where the Secretary of Agriculture is testifying. We were talking there about the pattern of farm income. It is very interesting, if you back out Government payments, which have been increasing now in the last several years in response to this economic calamity—in 1996, farm income absent Government payments was \$46 billion.

This year farm income, absent Government payments, is estimated to be \$27 billion. Farm income from the prices that farmers receive for the commodities they sell is in a virtual free-fall.

This chart shows headlines from the newspapers back home talking about what is happening to farm prices. The first one is from the major paper in our State: "Going down, down, down. USDA sees lower prices for wheat, corn, soybeans, and other major crops."

Another major story: "Lower crop prices predicted."

Again, the story is the same—collapsing farm prices.

Farmers have been hurt by more than low prices. They have been hurt by what I call the "triple whammy" of bad prices, bad weather, and bad policy.

The bad prices are right at the heart of what is causing this farm collapse. This chart shows farm prices of two major commodities, wheat and barley, for a 53-year period. It really tells the story.

These are inflation-adjusted prices. So we are comparing apples to apples.

These are what farmers have been receiving for these major commodities from 1946 to 1999. You can see that the blue line is wheat. Wheat has gone from almost \$18 a bushel back in the 1940s to about \$2.50 a bushel today—a long-term price decline without many real interruptions, although we saw a major one back in the 1970s. We all remember that period when farm prices

skyrocketed. But absent that, we have really been in a long-term price decline for wheat, barley, and many other commodities as well.

I think this chart tells a very important story because it compares the prices farmers receive for what they sell and the prices they pay for what they buy.

The green line goes back to 1991 and shows what prices farmers are paying for the inputs that they must buy to produce crops. You can see that the prices farmers pay have been going up very sharply. On the other hand, prices that farmers have been receiving went up to a peak in 1996—interestingly enough, right at the time we passed the last farm bill. In fact, we were told at the time we would see permanently high farm prices. That proved to be absolutely wrong. Those permanently high prices lasted about 90 days. Since then, we have seen a virtual price collapse.

Just as I indicated before, prices farmers have been receiving have been dropping dramatically, and the prices for the things they pay have been rising inexorably. That creates this enormous gap between the prices they are paying and the prices they are receiving. That is what has led to that reduction in farm income I talked about in my initial remarks. This is a crisis by any definition.

If we look at what is happening to individual commodities in relationship to the prices farmers receive and the actual costs of producing those commodities, we can see it very clearly.

This is what has happened with respect to wheat prices. The green line is the cost of production. The red line is the prices farmers are receiving for their product. You can see the prices farmers receive are far below the costs of producing the product. That is what has led to this cash flow crunch. That is why farmers are telling us: If you do not take dramatic action, tens of thousands of us are going to go out of business.

In my State, the estimates are that we will lose 20 or 30 percent of our farmers in the next 18 months unless we act. Let me repeat that. In North Dakota, we are being told by the experts at the State university and major farm organizations that unless we act we will lose 20 to 30 percent of the farmers in my State in the next 18 months. That is a crisis.

It is not just in wheat. You see the same pattern. This is soybeans. We don't grow many soybeans in North Dakota. Soybeans are grown further south and to the east. But you can see the same kind of pattern.

Here is the cost of production. Here is what the farmers are receiving. Since 1997, farmers are well below the cost of production with respect to soybeans. In wheat, the pattern is the same, and in soybeans. But there are

other crops as well that are critically important.

This shows what has happened in corn. The red line again is the price. The green line is the cost of production. Since 1997, we have been below the cost of production in corn.

You can't stay in business very long in that circumstance. You can't stay in business very long when you are getting less in terms of a price for your product than what it costs you to produce that product. You can hang in there a while as you give up equity and as you go backwards on your balance sheet, but at some point the banker comes calling. He says: Mr. farmer, you are out of business. You can't continue to lose equity.

The result has been that we have started to lose farm families in my State in a very dramatic way. Back in 1989 we had over 28,000 family farmers in our State. We can see that we held that in 1990, and in 1991 we saw a drop of about a thousand farmers. Then, in 1992, we actually got some recovery. In 1993, we dropped down to about 26,000. Since then, it has been a constant erosion, so that now we are down to about 22,000 family-sized farms in our State. It is really a dramatic decline in the last 20 years—almost a 20-percent drop.

Remember what I said. The experts are telling us now that we could see another 20-percent drop in just the next 18 months—perhaps even more than that; perhaps even as much as a 30-percent loss unless we act.

What are the reasons for this? Part of the reason is the financial collapse in Asia and the financial collapse in Russia because those were major customers for our farm commodities. But there are other reasons as well.

I believe one of the key reasons is the budget decisions that were made at the time of the last farm bill. The last farm bill had some strengths to it, some pluses. The biggest strength, I believe, is the flexibility it provided to farmers to plant for the market rather than a farm program. But we also made some budget decisions at the time that made it very difficult to write any kind of reasonable farm bill.

This chart shows what I am talking about. It shows the resources that were provided to agriculture under the previous farm bill. That averaged \$10 billion a year. The new farm bill provided \$5 billion a year. In other words, the support for agriculture was cut in half at the time of the last farm bill.

That has special implications because if we look at what was happening with our major competitors, we see that they were doing something quite differently. While we were dramatically cutting our support for producers, our European competitors—our major competitors—were maintaining very high levels of support. The Europeans were spending, on average, \$44 billion a year—on average, \$6 billion for us. This